

*I Have Engraved You
on the
Palms of My Hands*



Sirpouhi & Mariane Tarkhanian circa 1920

*The Story of Sirpouhi Tarkhanian
by
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“Sirpouhi”

April 24, 2005. The 1915 Genocide by the Young Turks of the Ottoman Empire was remembered in the heart of New York City – Times Square. The scornful screams of evil were silenced by the gathering of thousands of Armenian voices who, in one accord, beckoned the power of the Most High God seeking justice. Religious and Political figures looked into the face of a nation whose political smile can no longer be hidden by the deception that dwells in the heart of a government whose dark past is slowly being revealed by the light of Truth. The tides are turning. God parted Times Square like the Red Sea and Armenians crossed over to continue their journey to the Promised Land.

It wasn't like that 90 years ago. In their valiant struggle to survive, half of a Nation of three million Armenians perished from starvation during the death marches or were slaughtered by the Turkish saber. Those who lived, endured torture. Children were taken into slavery. This is the story of one such child, whose journey and cry for justice began 90 years ago.

Everek, Turkey – 1915. Sirpouhi Tarkhanian was five

years old when the war broke out. Her father was living and working in New York City since 1913. Like many men of that generation, he came to this country to seek employment, save his money and slowly bring the rest of his family to the land of opportunity.....the land of milk and honey.....America. Sirpouhi, her mother, Mariane, two brothers and a cousin along with the rest of the women and children of the village were given only a 48-hour notice by the Ottoman army to quickly collect whatever belongings they could carry. Soon, they would begin the long march into the Syrian desert. The defenseless villagers were grouped into caravans and ordered to walk "the walk" of no return.

The days turned into weeks. There was nothing to shield them from the hot desert sun. No water to quench their thirst. No food to nourish their emaciated bodies. Sirpouhi remembers having to leave her five-year old cousin behind because she was too weak and malnourished to continue. Her baby brother died in her mother's arms. The weak and the elderly slowly succumbed to their torturous ordeal. Somehow, Sirpouhi was able to continue.

The state-appointed Turkish soldiers, or "gendarmes" did nothing to protect the innocents. Resembling mounted police gone astray, they herded their victims like cattle, raped young maidens and encouraged released prisoners and local Moslems to do the same.

The walk became increasingly difficult. Women and children were dying and left along the way without proper burial. Mountainous Kurds descended upon the dwindling caravan and found their opportunity to make deals with the surviving parents to take their children. Some had good intentions while others wanted slaves.

One Kurdish family approached Mariane and began to bargain for her daughter. Knowing that death was inevitable if her child continued on the march, Mariane made a heart-wrenching decision. She chose life for Sirpouhi and relinquished her child's place in the Tarkhanian Family to the protective custody of a strange nomadic woman. Too weak and disoriented to protest, Sirpouhi walked to her new family and turned for one final look at her mother. At that precise moment, time stood still and she bid farewell to her childhood. Little did Sirpouhi know that "Time" would make its presence known again in the near future.

Sirpouhi arrived at her new home which was quite different from the village home in which she lived. They spoke a strange language and lived in what resembled tent-like structures. On this first night, the tents surrounded a large cauldron of hot boiling water. Seeing this, the frightened, panic-stricken Sirpouhi began to scream and cry for her mother. The startled Kurdish father didn't know what to do. So, he summoned another Armenian girl in their camp and asked her to explain the reason for Sirpouhi's outburst.

"She thinks you are going to boil her and eat her for dinner," explained the older Armenian girl.

He calmly ordered his wife to empty the hot contents. She then dipped a towel in the remaining water and sponge bathed Sirpouhi's trembling, tiny frame that was exposed to the elements for so many weeks. Here we see the true character of this Kurdish father. He did not beat or admonish her. He treated her with kindness and understanding. Thankfully, his intentions were, indeed, to raise this child and not subject her to slavery.

Sirpouhi learned a new language and took on a new name – Fatma. The Kurdish parents raised her as their own in the Moslem tradition. She felt comfortable and welcomed in her new environment. The memory of a life she once knew in Everek slowly faded.....so, too, the fluency of her mother tongue – Armenian.

Two years passed. A census was taken by the Turkish government revealing that many Armenian orphans were living with Turkish and Kurdish families along the countryside. This became a wedge in the premeditated plan of solving the “Armenian Question”. For whatever political motive, Turkey began another maneuver of systematic removal. They sought, found and flushed out these children and placed them in Turkish orphanages.

When the soldiers came to take Fatma, her Kurdish father fell to his knees and begged to keep her promising to raise her in the Moslem faith. His plea was denied. Fatma was removed from her family for the second time in her short life, taken to an orphanage and given another name – Leyla Abdoulah.

All the children in that institution were Armenians and bore the surname “Abdoulah” stamping them as *gavours* or infidels. If caught speaking the forbidden Armenian language amongst themselves, the children were beaten or severely punished.

Sirpouhi is now eight years old. She finds a piece of paper in the orphanage. She recognizes the letters as Armenian and fixes her full attention on the Armenian text. Seeing this, the guardian of the orphanage brings her before the headmistress where she is beaten severely. Sirpouhi remembers thinking.....

"There must be something wrong with being Armenian if I am so beaten for even remembering that I *might* have been Armenian at one time." Reflecting further, "I *must* be Armenian, I-*am* Armenian.....otherwise, how could I recognize this and why would they beat me if I wasn't?"

The care Sirpouhi was given at the orphanage did not compare to the comforts of the dwelling place of the Kurdish family she left behind. She was not well-fed, clothed properly or bathed regularly. The cold-hearted care of her superiors made her feel very unhappy and insecure.

The Turkish orphanages were growing in number and swelling with Armenian orphans. Children were being moved from one place to the other because of lack of room. As more orphanages sprang up, Armenian children were shuffled around as invalid, displaced persons void of identity, home and country.

Sirpouhi and several other children were chosen to transfer to another orphanage by train. This end of the line depot was in Mersine which was 100 miles from her village in Everek. Armenian women who heard about the transfer were also at the train station grasping for hope to find their lost children who may have miraculously survived the Genocide.

One woman from Everek happened to be at the station looking for her daughter. She saw Sirpouhi and recognized her immediately. Sirpouhi possessed an unmistakable, strong, distinct look that identified her as a member of the Tarkhanian family. The woman gripped the frightened Sirpouhi by her shoulders, looked into her Tarkhanian eyes and said these words.....

"Your name is Sirpouhi Tarkhanian. Do not forget what I am about to tell you. You are *not* Turkish. You are Armenian! You have a father who lives in America. You are Armenian!"

The woman disappeared into the crowd as people pushed and shoved to find their children.

"I am Armenian! I am Armenian!" She rejoiced, silently repeating "Sirpouhi" over and over again in her mind. She couldn't remember her family name as it was given to her moments ago.....just "Sirpouhi".....That was all she needed to know for now. *"My name is Sirpouhi and I am Armenian!"*

Sirpouhi boarded the train leaving behind Fatma and Leyla Abdoulah.

The orphanage was no different from the one she left behind. The inhumane cruelty and neglect prevailed. Forced child labor was not rewarded with proper nutrition and their code of dress was pitiful. To avoid beatings, Sirpouhi was obedient and accomplished what was expected of her with a lonely heart.

The Turkish government began to behave with more leniency due to the presence of the American Red Cross and the political atmosphere of the world. They submitted to outside pressures and allowed the Armenian children to be taken by the many Armenian orphanages being established now in Turkey.

Thanks to the intervention of so many groups in the diaspora, whose mission it was to save the Armenian children from total oblivion, Sirpouhi returned to her roots when she was transferred one more time - this time to an Armenian orphanage in Constantinople.

The transition was dramatic. How well she remembers the day she emerged from an environment filled with hostile, hateful people whose evil acts desensitized, demoralized and minimized her value as a human being.

Hours later, she enters the portals of the Armenian orphanage. Like rushing water bursting from a dam, the once-forbidden words flow from the depths of her innermost being – “My name is Sirpouhi and I am Armenian” – words that could only be whispered or spoken in her mind up until this day. The Armenian women receive her with Christian love and compassion. The emptiness in her heart is filled. She knows she belongs with these people. She feels safe. She feels wanted. She feels loved. Despair releases its mighty talon and hope marches in.

Armenian orphanages were springing up everywhere in Constantinople. Relief organizations from America worked through the Church to help establish hundreds of homes in Turkey’s capitol city with the hope of reuniting these children with their parents.

Oftentimes, Armenian mothers who survived “the walk”, would visit these small homes looking for their lost children. Sirpouhi remembers lining up with her friends while anxious mothers searched each face for recognition. Everyday, Sirpouhi prayed that her mother would find her. With each disappointing encounter, Sirpouhi slowly hardened her heart and decided that she did not want to be found. The pain of rejection was too great for her to endure day after day. The orphanage was now her permanent home. Cared for, protected and loved, she refused to subject her already wounded heart to more injury. Sadly, the cruelty she endured after she was separated from her mother, would be a recollection she

would have to share with her own children someday. During the march, Mariane endured a different kind of pain – the pain of remembrance – the pain of a mother whose infant son died in her arms, whose five-year old daughter was given away to a stranger, and whose middle son was left behind because he was too frail, weak and malnourished to continue the march. Mariane was strong, resilient and determined to survive because she needed to find her remaining son and daughter. With this mission in mind, she decided to do the unthinkable.

Just as they were approaching the desert, she noted that the Turkish soldiers were showing signs of fatigue and had become lax in their duties. They did not notice that Mariane escaped from the dwindling caravan and fled to a nearby Turkish village.

There, she was taken in by the Agha – the head of a wealthy Turkish family – and without pay, became their slave for two years. World War I ended. Towards the end of her tenure, she was paid a small amount of money which she saved. One day, she boldly approached the stern Agha and asked permission to be released from his employment so that she may use her meager savings to travel to the capitol city and find her husband's relatives. Surprisingly, he consented and even gave her extra money to buy a one-way train ticket to Constantinople.

Alone now and forsaken – without her husband, her children, and her home in Everek, her fears mounted. Although free, her lonely heart was anxious as she embarked on a quest into the unknown. The only Person who searched her heart, who knew her every thought and who brought her safely thus far was her Savior.....and safely He will lead her home.

The train station was bustling with people. Thousands

of Armenian children were still being transferred from Turkish orphanages to Armenian orphanages in Constantinople. Armenian mothers were seen searching frantically for their lost children.

Suddenly, a voice from within this mass of humanity called out her name.

"Mariane, I have seen your daughter! She is alive and was taken to an orphanage in Constantinople!"

Upon hearing this, Mariane fainted which was not uncommon for her. Frequently, she would succumb to these spells whenever she got extremely excited with sudden news.

Miraculously, God timed it for the two women to meet at the same place, at the same time. This was the same villager from Everek who spotted Sirpouhi years earlier at the same train depot.

With hope and renewed strength, she boards the train bound for Constantinople, and like a soaring eagle, the train speeds towards its destination where the promise for tomorrow awaits her arrival.

Mariane found the Tarkhanian family and they notified her husband that she was alive and well. She remained with her relatives for one year while waiting for the legal immigration paperwork to be finalized. Her husband sent her money regularly and arranged for her voyage to America. While all this was happening, Mariane visited approximately one hundred orphanages in Constantinople looking for her son and daughter but with no success. Convinced that her children were no longer alive, she decided to join her husband in America.

One night, just prior to her departure, Mariane had a dream. She saw Sirpouhi pounding her [mother's] chest and crying, "Why are you leaving me? Why are you going without me?!" The dream was so compelling, she postponed her trip and convinced her relative to assist her once again in her search.

"There is one more children's home outside of Constantinople in a suburb called Bursa," he announced. "*Yeghav.....*Let's go."

Together, Mariane and her relative arrived at the orphanage. When the headmistress opened the door and saw Mariane, she immediately connected her look with one of the children – the resemblance was so strong. She waited for Mariane to speak.

"I have a daughter and her name is Sirpouhi Tarkhanian."

"Well", she said with a smile, "we have a Sirpouhi here. However, today she is on an outing. Why don't you go home for now and wait. When Sirpouhi returns, we will bring her to you."

When Sirpouhi returned from her island trip with the children, the headmistress invited her into her office.

"Sirpouhi, someone came today looking for her daughter. I have a strong feeling she may be your mother. I promised I would take you to see her this evening."

"I don't want to go!" Sirpouhi protested. "She's not my mother! Please, don't take me there! I don't want to be moved again! I like where I am!"

The wise headmistress insisted and together they departed for Constantinople.

They arrived at the house. Sirpouhi waited in the parlor. Mariane was in the next room. They saw each other from the doorway and their eyes locked.

Time stood at a respectful distance, remained still.....and waited.

Sirpouhi just stared and made no attempt to reclaim the lost memory of her mother. After all, five turbulent years in the life of Mariane Tarkhanian must have changed her appearance dramatically. The march, the hot desert sun, the lack of food, the slavery, the heartache, indeed, aged her prematurely beyond recognition. Mariane – on the other hand – knew immediately.

“This is my child!” she cried. The sudden shock made her faint.

Time relinquished its place and escorted Sirpouhi across the door’s threshold and back to the days of her youth when she remembered cradling her mother’s head in her lap many times as a child.....just as she was now..... crying, “*Mayrig! Mayrig!* (Mama! Mama!) Please wake up!”

On a cold, November morning in 1920, the great ocean liner waited at its berthed dock to receive its passengers. Mariane walked up the gangway on to the main deck of the vessel to watch the ship’s crew raise the gangplank from its side. The ship sounded its loud, harsh whistle signaling the tugboat to guide the vessel out of the harbor and into the open sea. Finally, after a long, at times stormy journey the Lady that guards the shores of liberty

could be seen from a distance. Mariane arrived safely at Ellis Island and joined her husband. Accompanying her on the ocean voyage was their daughter, Sirpouhi. Although Mariane made numerous attempts to find her son, it is assumed that he was found and raised by Kurds. Sirpouhi lived in New York City with her parents. She later married a young Armenian, also from New York City named Yervant Berberian.. They had three children – Zabel, Jack, and world renowned oud virtuoso – John Berberian.

Sirpouhi and Yervant are no longer with us. They have completed their exile on earth. God brought them safely home to the Promised Land – *Eevereen Yerousaghem* – the New Jerusalem - and were reunited with their compatriots who were waiting at the City Gate....

"I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:15)

~ The End ~



Writer's Note:

I first heard this story from Sirpouhi herself over 35 years ago in the home of our friends Barbara and John. So moved by her testimony, I vowed that one day I would document her experience and preserve the legacy she left behind for generations to come. I called upon Barbara to refresh my memory with the timeline and order of events. Together with John and Zabel, they provided me with accurate information as they remember it so that I could write this story about Sirpouhi.....
